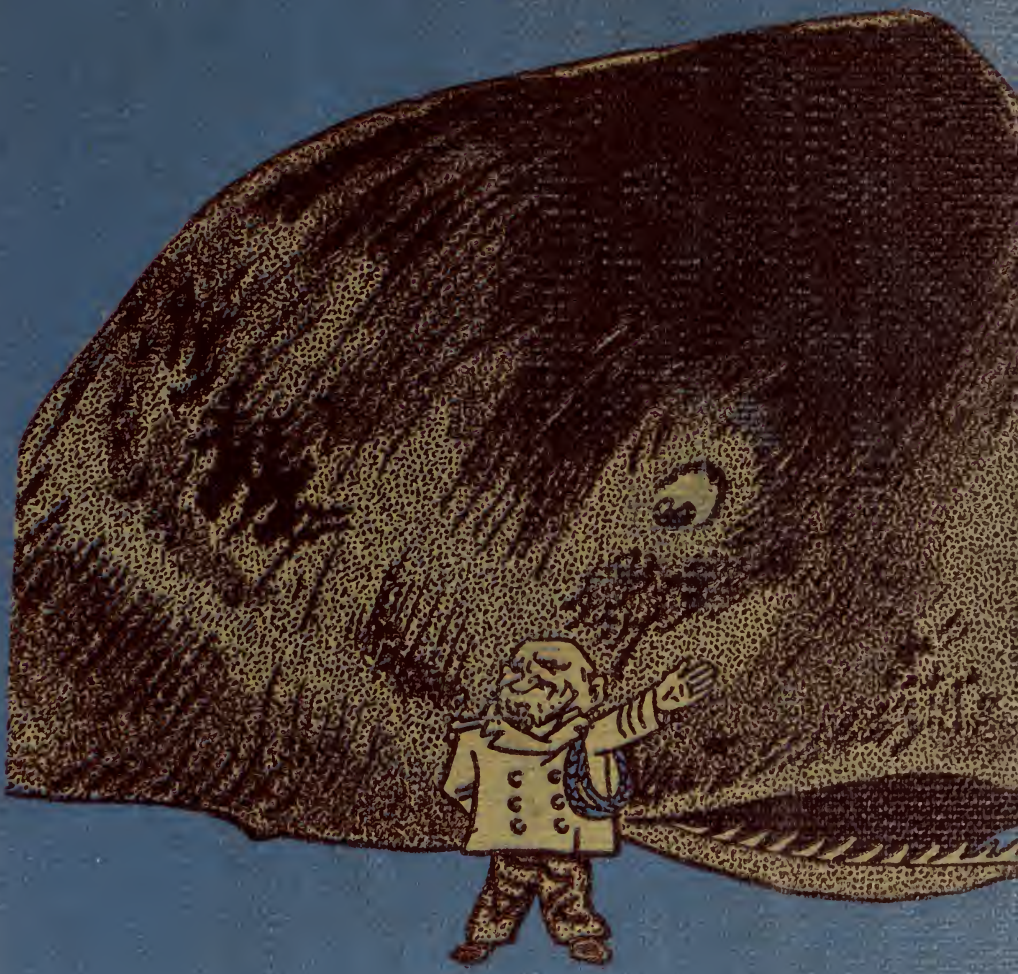
UNCLE BEN'S WHALE



WALTER D. EDMONDS

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Uncle Ben's whale
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UNCLE BEN'S
WHALE

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UNCLE BEN'S WHALE

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 55-8635
Lithographed in the United States of America

UNCLE BEN'S WHALE

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WE sawed the last cut on the last tree and sat down side by side on the log. John got out a wad of Happy Days, when he saw that I was lighting my pipe, and stowed it away in his right cheek. His eye was taking in the river valley, with the canal beyond. Some plover were calling down the river, but he did not hear them. And then, just as I was getting back my wind, he swung his eye round at me. "Say," said he, "did I ever tell you about my Uncle Ben?"

I

MY Uncle Ben Meekum was kind of a dingy old coot. They say in his early days he was a pretty fast kind of a spark; but when I first remember him he'd married Aunt Em, and the two of them made just about the most respectable sort of home life a woman could want. Uncle Ben would load his boat, and him

and Henry Plat, who done his driving, would keep the old boat going, along with the aid of Ben's mules; but inside that boat Aunt Em ruled the roost.

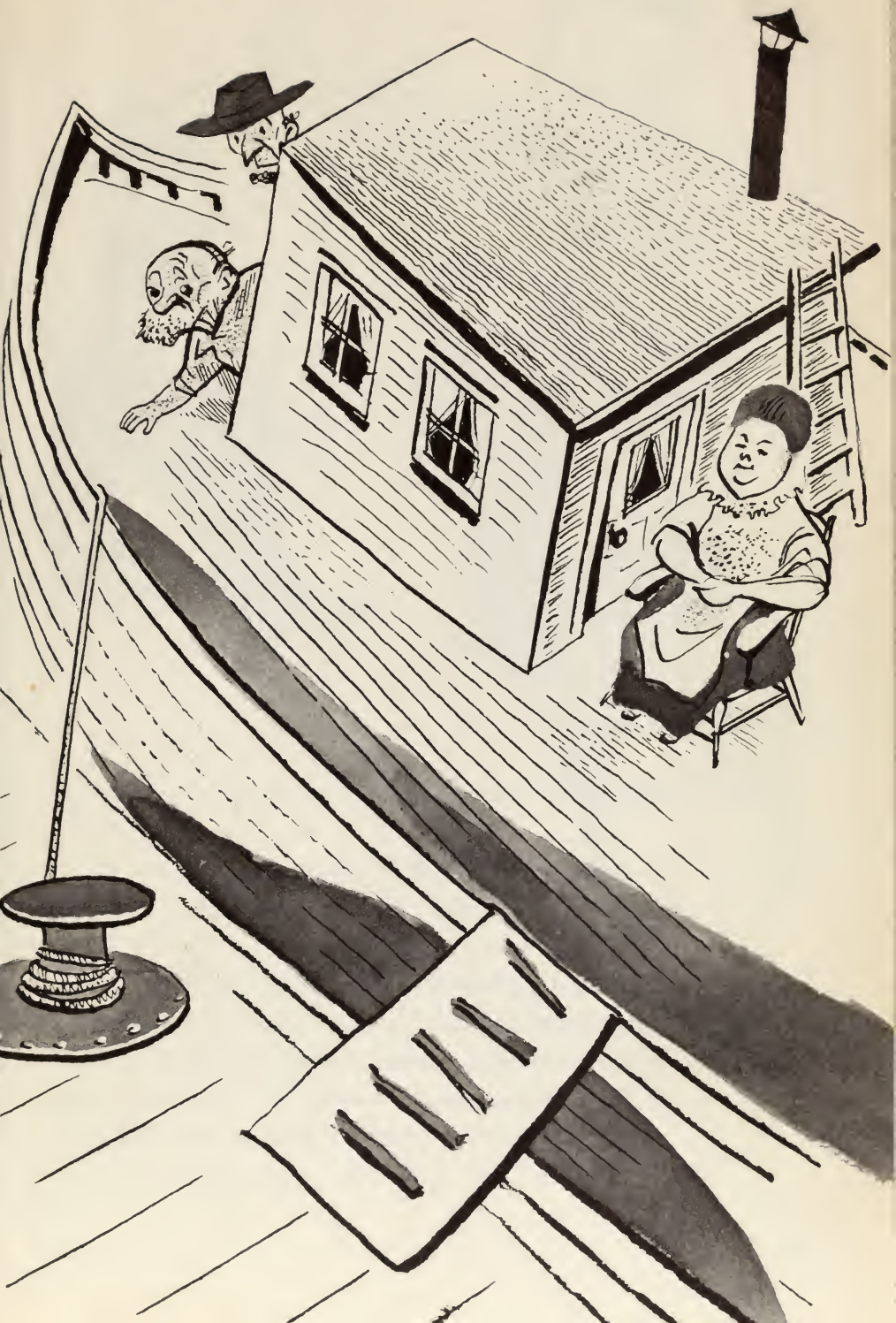
It was kind of hard on a man, after he'd run a boat to suit his own notions for forty years to have the bad luck to get married to Aunt Em. You couldn't spit out of the window or knock out your pipe on top of the stove or have a drink in your own cabin (or anywhere else for that matter), and she used to make him and Henry, who was bothered with soft feet, wash 'em every night before they come to supper.

It was a pitiful sight to see them two old coots setting up on the roof of the cabin on a cold night and easing their toes into a basin. Every time he felt the touch of the water, Henry'd say he was going to get loose and leave, but Uncle Ben'd beg him to stay.

Henry'd never actually have gone off and left Uncle Ben defenseless. Them two had been boating it together ever since Uncle Ben'd got his boat, and Henry was just as scared of Aunt Em as Uncle Ben was. If he'd have left, he'd have been scared clean crazy of her coming after him.

I don't say Aunt Em was a bad woman, but she was too big to live in a boat. She'd always been heavy and her blood pressure generally kept going up on her. Quick-tempered! And she could have taken on both of them old men at once if she'd been a-mind to, and she probably did when she got restive.

You see, she belonged to my family, and Uncle Ben only got in by marrying her. His name was Meekum, and he had to take about everything that was coming to him.



He used to talk to Pa about it and ask what a man had ought to do, and Pa'd tell him, "Strop her up and if that don't work, use the hone." But Uncle Ben'd shake his head and say Pa was a young man. Then he'd give Pa some of his own dauntless early history until he'd start off home with active ideas.

But the minute Aunt Em'd get her eye on him, he'd lose his nerve.

It went on that way till the time Uncle Ben made a big deal in New York. He'd often thought before that of sneaking out on her; but she'd put all the money he used to keep on the boat in a bank in Boonville in her own name, because Uncle Ben couldn't read nor write, and she took the money the boat earned off of him as quick as it come in.

Well, sir, Uncle Ben finally did bust loose, and this is the way it happened.

II

IN the spring of the year Uncle Ben and Henry had loaded up their boat with ice at Forestport and picked Aunt Em up at Boonville, where they spent the winter in her mother's house, and they all started off down the canal for New York.

They made a regulation haul to Albany and left their mules in the round barn and got into a tow on the Swiftsure and had the ride down the Hudson

River. All the way Uncle Ben kept considering what he'd get to haul back. Fertilizer would have made him a good haul, and he thought the trip to New Jersey after it might be pleasant. But Aunt Em wouldn't consider it. She said it would make the boat smell too strong.

She took a lot of pride in that boat, even if it was Uncle Ben's. She'd had it painted up a good bright yellow with a white trim and she had the cabin fixed up dainty with curtains at the windows and the best geraniums on the Erie Canal. She was a good hand to cook and keep house, and the best meals I ever ate I ate right there. She could make a

pie to bring the watter to a man's eyes. And the boat did look nice. It was all painted blue inside, with the cupboards white and the stove black and the pans always hanging in the same place. She had a little brass clock, too, that struck the hours with a bell. It didn't keep very good time, always being slow; but the way she polished it you would have thought it had come from the factory in the morning mail.

The boat's name was *Louisa* and you can see it laying in that set-back below Hawksinsville today, what's left of it.

So Aunt Em'd said there'd be no fertilizer, and Uncle Ben had to agree. Him and Henry had had it all figured out, but most of the time Henry was riding on one of the other boats traveling down the canal and river, where it was more peaceful, so Uncle Ben got to New York without knowing what he was going to haul back.

Well, they tied up in the East River dock the same as usual, waiting for a calmer day to get the boat across the harbor, and they hadn't more than got to the Swiftsure office to pay off before the clerk handed Uncle Ben a letter for Aunt Em. Uncle Ben was an ignorant old bezabor when it come to civilized ideas. Pa used to say he'd been born with just

as much sense as anybody else, but that he'd lost progress since then. When the clerk explained who the letter was for, Uncle Ben paid off, and him and Henry went back to the boat.

Uncle Ben walked right up the gang and down into the cabin. Getting a letter that way made him feel important.

"Wipe your feet," says Aunt Em.

"To heck with my feet," says Uncle Ben. "Here's a letter, Em."

"For me?" she asks, and Uncle Ben says, "Yes, sir."

She dropped the potato she had commenced peeling into the wrong pan and grabbed that paper. It took her just a minute to figure it all out and she turned kind of pale.

"Ma's sick," she says. "I got to get right home. It says that she's real sick again with the sugar diabetes."

"I don't wonder," says Henry from the door, "the way she eats it with her coffee."

But Aunt Em didn't notice it. She was all dithery.

"I got to start right out," she says.

"And me unload this ice into the river?" asks Uncle Ben.

"Stupid!" she says. "Do you think your cheap mules can get me home in time? Poor Ma, with such a son-in-law! It's a lucky thing she's got a daughter."

"Well," says Uncle Ben, "if you want to beat out the *Louisa,* you'll have to take a train of cars."

And that's what she done. She got out her old satchel and her hat and she put off with them for the station as tight as she could make it.

"You come right home the minute you've got rid of that ice," she says.

"Yes, Em," says Uncle Ben.

"And you make Henry mop out the floor every other day and don't you set down after eating till you've done the dishes. And don't you dasst to use that new china set."

"No, Em," says Uncle Ben.

"And you put the money in the box when you get paid and don't you touch a penny."

And then the train took her off.

III

THERE ain't anybody to tell how Uncle Ben commenced getting his old spunk back. But he kept setting a pretty good pace right along till he and Henry got back to the boat. Well, they took the ice across the harbor, and it was the first time in ten year Uncle Ben hadn't got sick making the voyage. He stood on the cabin set-back, holding the sweep with his shirt unbuttoned and the spray slopping against his wishbone, and every time a gull hollered he'd look up against the sun. And Henry Plat, he lay on the deck, looking up at Uncle Ben, full of admiration.

Well, sir, they unloaded that ice and they took a tow back to the East River dock, and halfway across they seen a lot of boats rowing to beat the nation and right ahead of them the scaredest whale that ever got mixed in the traffic of New York. There was a lot in the papers afterward about how that whale got into the city anyway, and they had pictures of it, and a picture of Uncle Ben a-standing on the *Louisa,* holding a skipper's cap in his hand and looking modest. After it was all over, Uncle Ben had bought him a secondhand hat with gold braid in a slopshop and let on how he'd been around the Horn in his early manhood.

But what happened was that that whale seen the old *Louisa* butting her stummick on the waves and I guess he thought she was another whale.

LOUISA
LOUISA

Uncle Ben seen her coming and yelled at Henry to look and tell him what in tarnation was coming and Henry looked and just hollered. Uncle Ben was always quick in a tight situation and he grabbed his horn and let out a good one on it, but the whale run up alongside of him and squirted the boat with watter and blood and Uncle Ben lost his temper and grabbed his boat hook and jammed it against the

whale to keep her off and stuck her right in the eye. I guess the old brute was pretty near exhausted because she just raised a fin and died right there.

Well, the other boats come up, and the men in them claimed the whale was theirs; but Uncle Ben had his boat hook well set in the brute's eye and he wouldn't listen. Seems as he made a great impression and they laughed and asked one another what they would do with a whale anyhow, and pretty soon

they asked Uncle Ben would he buy out their share. And he smacked his hand on his wallet and fishes out the money, and what with counting and the motion of the waves and Henry Plat he had only just enough left to pay for a tow up the river and get his mules out of the barn in Albany.

IV

WHEN the *Louisa* got back to the dock again and the watter got calm, Henry Plat rose up and commenced taking notice.

"What," he says, "are you going to do with that whale, Ben?" And then he remarks, "How Em's going to make you squeak when she finds out what

you've spent your money on!"

But Uncle Ben was too set up with his new importance to be scared.

"Shut up, you poor jellyfish," he says. "Em hasn't got nothing to say about this whale."

"No," says Henry, "I guess not."

Well, right then a lot of reporters come aboard and they begun asking questions. Uncle Ben got him his hat with gold braid and a shiny visor and had his picture took. And just after the whole of them had left, along comes a boat with a chesty bung in uniform that comes aboard and wants to know how long Uncle Ben aims to keep his property in New York

harbor. Well, Uncle Ben says he'll get it out of the way pretty quick and treats him handsome and that was that.

But he still had Henry Plat to talk to before he could get any rest.

"What am I going to do with it? What am I going to *do?*" and right there he got his idea. "Why," he says, "I'm going to load that whale aboard the *Louisa* and take her up the Erie."

"Be you, Ben? What are you going to do that for?"

"I'm going to show her for a nickel."

Henry sneered. "How much money will that make when anybody can look at her from the towpath for nothing?"

"You shut up," said Uncle Ben.

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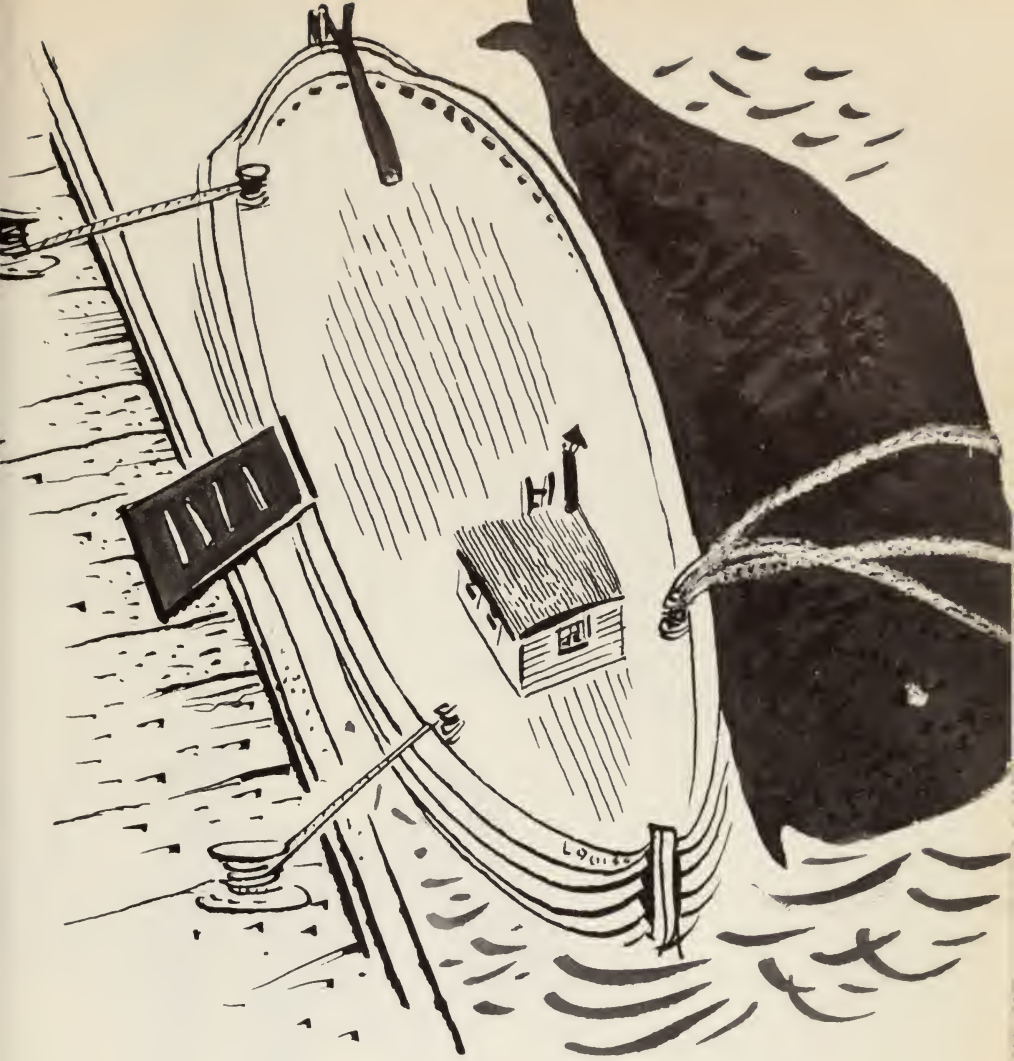
He'd got more up-and-coming every minute since Aunt Em had gone back to Boonville, and he wasn't going to let no bezabor like Henry Plat gum his fun. He just walks up the dock and goes off to the public library. Now he'd got a whale, he wanted to know all about it. So he walks in and says to the lady, "Please show me your whales, Miss." Well, that caught her attention and she was a pretty girl and in two minutes had got the whole business out

of Uncle Ben. "I want to find out what kind of a whale it is," he told her, "and all about it."

Well, she took him through a lot of books, and they discovered about fourteen different kind of whale. Finally they got Uncle Ben's whale sorted out as number eleven.

V



WHEN Uncle Ben come back to the *Louisa* about supper time, Henry asked him again what he aimed to do with his fish.

"Fish? That ain't no fish. Gosh, Henry, you're a ignorant bird, all right. Why that's a mammal!"

"What," asks Henry, "is a mammal?"

Uncle Ben just looks him up and down.

"Henry," he says, "your mother was one."

"Do you want to fight?" asks Henry.

"No," says Uncle Ben. "You've been upset by this business, Henry. Of course, it's been different with me. I've been around the Horn in my young days. In my day I've speared more'n a hundred of this identical variety. I've got sperms, and speared narwhales, and blowed the very guts out of a killer oncet at three hundred yards with my old thirty-eight."

"What's the name of this variety?"

"It's a cash-a-lot."

Henry looks at him kind of wondering. "Honest?"

Uncle Ben nods to him. "Honest," he says.

"Golly," says Henry, "maybe there is money in her after all."

"Listen, Henry, did you ever hear about a feller named Jonah?"

"Sure, he got swallered by one of them animals."

"That's right, and then he got spit up. Well, look here, Henry. Anybody that wants to can look at the outside of this whale for nothing, but them that want the whole works is going to have to pay me fifty cents."

"How're you going to show them the whole works, Ben?"

"I'm going to dig em out and make a room in his inside!" Uncle Ben looks proud.

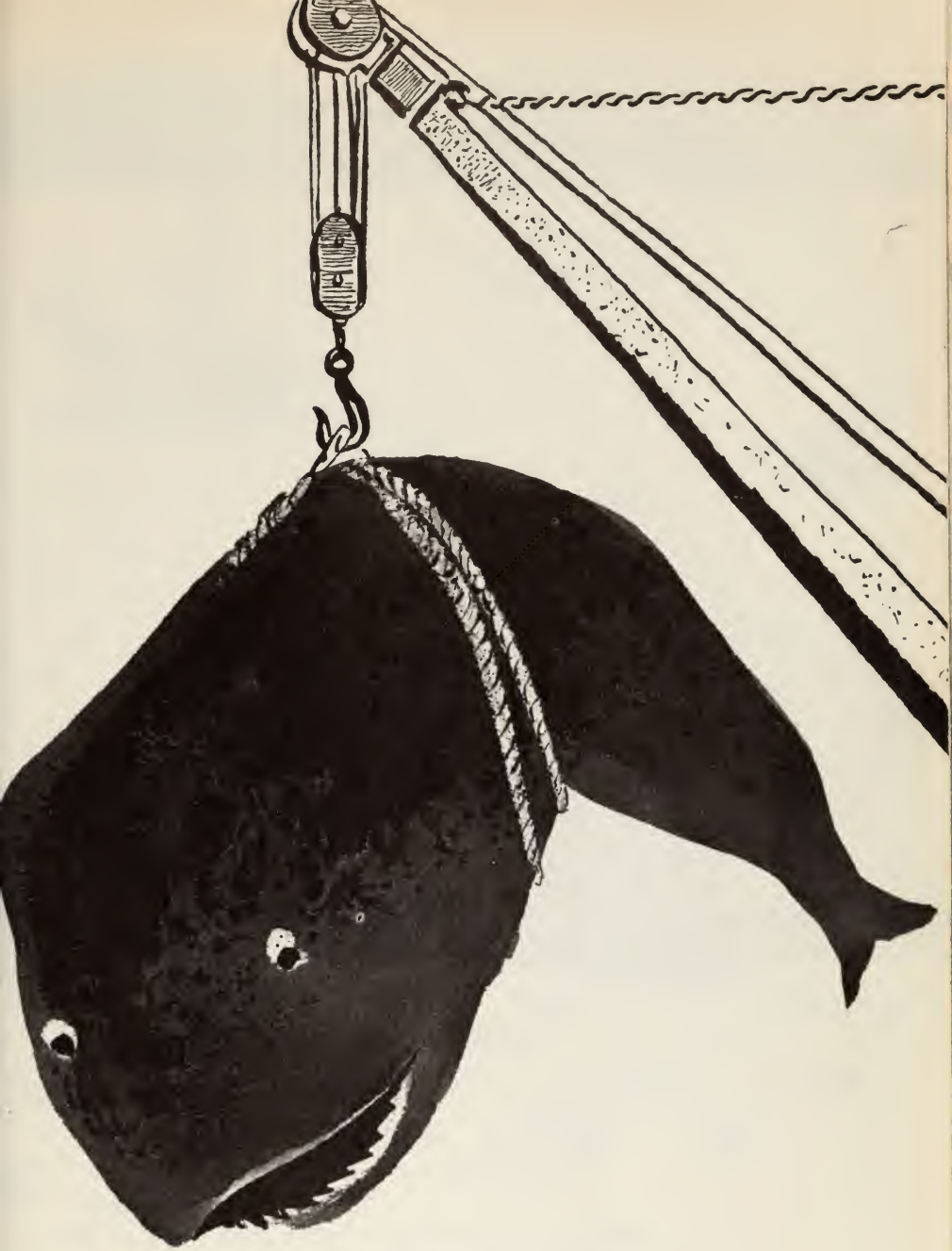
"But Ben," asks Henry, "if you dig them out, where in Sarah are you going to put them for people to see?"

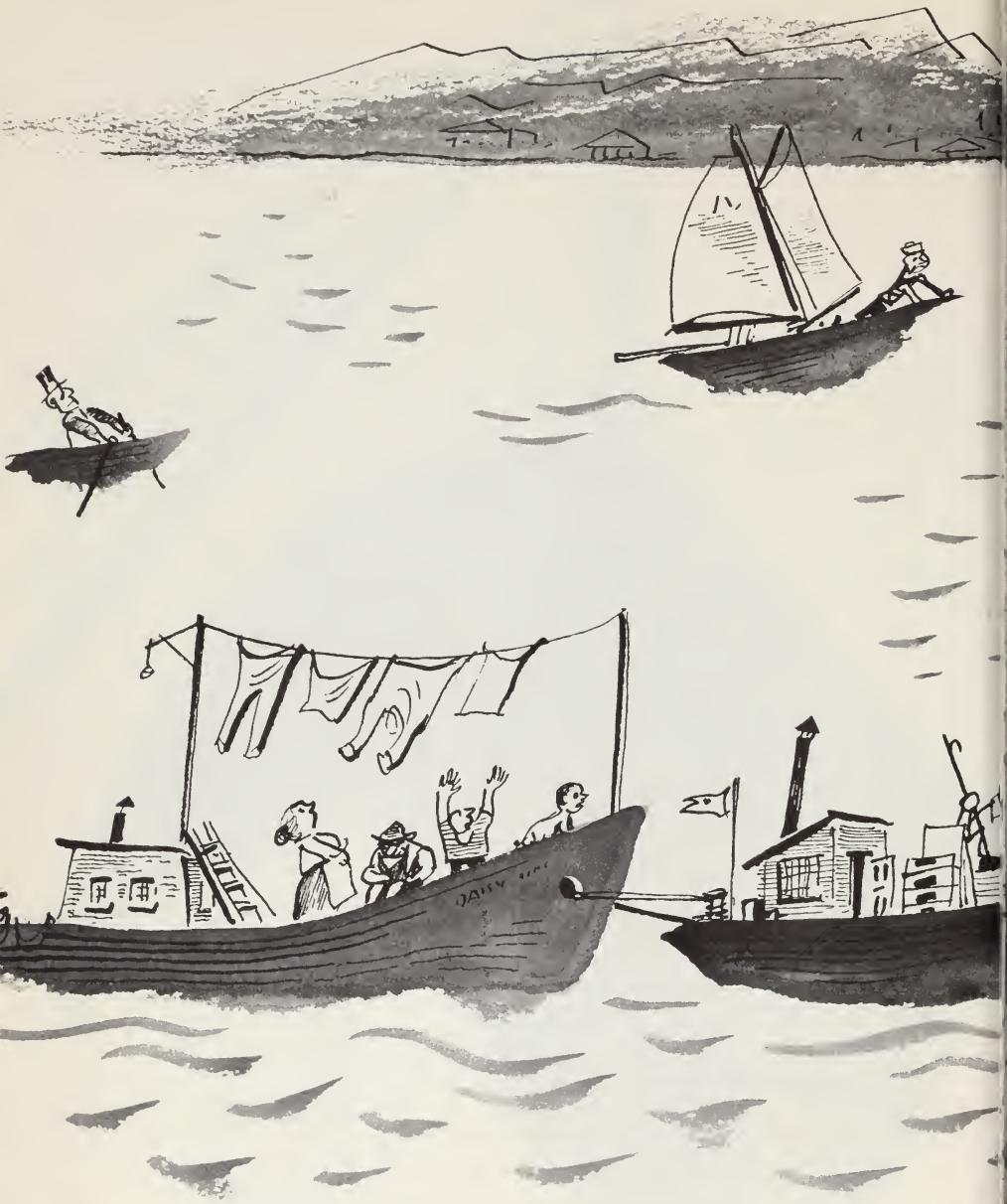
"Gosh, Henry, can't you think of nothing but inwards? I'm just going to have a room there and a bar—no, I guess I'll just have a kind of refreshment parlor—then I'd ought to get the ladies and children, too."

"That's an idea," says Henry, and it was.

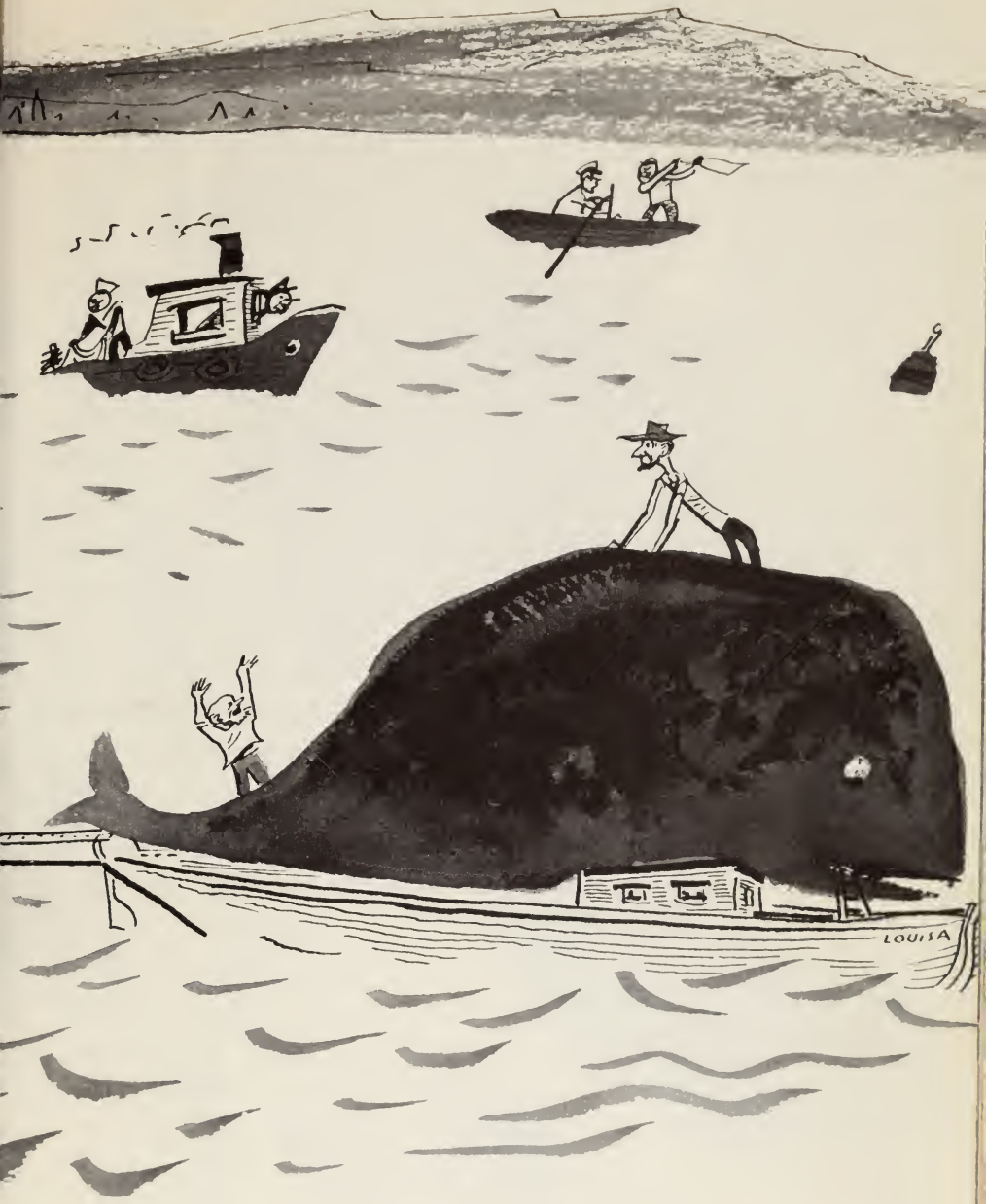
VI

UNCLE BEN and Henry got the whale hoisted onto the *Louisa* next morning with her nose on the cabin roof and the rest of her laying along the pit beams and the stable and her tail hanging over the front end. Then they joined their tow and started back for Albany.





Well, the old *Louisa* was the first boat in that line; but along about Spuytenduyvil the wind changed to the north and the rest of the boats made the Tug change the line to put her on the back end. They'd thought at first a whale was a pretty handsome thing to examine, but about there Uncle Ben



and Henry had got through the outside layer of fat. You could see them any time, burrowing in like a couple of beagles digging out a woodchuck. They had little shovels, very sharp, and they certainly made progress.

At first Uncle Ben was real mad at being stuck onto the back end of the tow, but Henry pointed out it would be handier getting rid of the insides of the whale so he didn't argue very hard. He was having too good a time. Henry wasn't so well fixed. What with digging back of Uncle Ben and getting the throwout, he was so danged greasy that he wouldn't dasst to scratch a match along his back end. No sir, and what's more, he wasn't fitted out for hard work and he couldn't keep up with Uncle Ben. That old coot was just about possessed. He'd got a dish towel tied around his beard and cotton in his ears and even at that, about every ten minutes he had to walk out and let himself dreen over the edge.

Well, about the second day they got pretty well into the core of the whale. They'd mixed themselves a mess of beans down in the cabin and Henry wanted to lay down on his bed, but Uncle Ben hadn't time. He kept explaining, "I got to get the outfit in afore we get to Watervliet." So up on deck he went and walked into the whale and the first stroke he took he went through between two bones and the yell he let out come right out of the whale's mouth and Henry come a-running.

"Where've you reached to, Ben?" he asks.

Uncle Ben didn't know. He was kind of puzzled, inside and looking out.

Henry looks around too, and says, "I don't see where that feller Jonah managed to get along. I don't

believe he was a whole week down inside like us are here. It ain't got no ventilation, hardly at all."

"You poor twerp," says Uncle Ben. "This ain't the same whale."

"I don't see what that's got to do with it."

"No, you've never been around the Horn. But I have and I've seen whales blow out the bad air fifty feet high."

"If there was that much pressure of bad air, I don't see how Jonah lasted out a minute."

"Well, maybe he was that kind of a feller," says Uncle Ben.

Well, when they got the insides into the river, Uncle Ben begun to fashion out a room. "Right here," he says, "is going to be the refreshment tables for the ladies. I'll get them in Albany. We won't need so

many cheers, with what we got in the cabin. And then," he says, "seeing as how the lighting ain't very good, I'll arrange a winder on each side." He stood there looking around kind of pleased and wondering. "Henry," he says, "what kind of curtains do you think would go best with these walls?"

Right then some blubber went into the back of Henry's neck and got the best of him.

"You're going to need something waterproof to wall this room," he says.

"Nonsense," says Uncle Ben, but it was a hot day and he discovered for himself there was a leak in the roof. But his ideas had got pretty well formed, and

by the time he'd showed the outside of his whale in Troy for fifteen cents he'd got the inside all fitted out. And when the *Louisa* hauled out of the basin for Lock Number One, the whole contraption did make a display.

First, the two mules, a couple of scrummy old screws, had had their harness blacked and tassels and rings hung out to hide the bare spots in their hides till they sounded like a circus parade. And then the towline had a twist of yeller cloth on it and a big ribbon bow. And then come Henry Plat. Uncle Ben had rigged out the poor bezabor in a secondhand coachman's outfit, and he had a top hat with a ribbon

bouquet on it and a coat with tails—and Henry's back end wasn't the kind to carry tails, it stuck out between—and white pants like knickers and a pink weskut, and then there was the boots with flesh tops. Henry had tried them out in Albany, but they pinched him so that he hollered and argued till Uncle Ben allowed him to go back to the old boots he always wore and the red socks Aunt Em had knitted him for Christmas. But even then the poor twerp's whiskers and little eyes looked kind of wistful, as if the clothes had got him and was taking him somewhere where he didn't want to go.

But then come the boat. They had kind of washed her outside but she looked a little greasy; but as Uncle Ben said, everybody had seen a bullhead boat anyway. It was the whale they'd look at. And sure enough, there was the whale stretched out on the boat, looking Uncle Ben right in the eye where

he stood steering. She had a door in her side opposite the gang, and a flag stuck into her nose hole saying CASHALOT in green letters. And over the door was a sign saying "Be a Jonah for fifty cents." And underneath it said, "Complete equipment."

And that wasn't all. Getting familiar with the whale the way he had had made Uncle Ben feel kind of affectionate toward her and he wanted her to look her best; so he'd got a pair of glass eyes off an oculist in Albany which was as big as apples and he'd

arranged them in her, which gave her a real active appearance. He got himself a sailor's coat to go with his gold-braided hat and a new tie and done the steering. Every time he come to a village he blew on his horn and put into the dock. And the whole town come down. And danged near everyone would go inside the whale. It certainly was rigged out.

Uncle Ben had built a regular room out of matched lumber and he had a winder on the far side opposite the door, and a chair and table in the front end, and a bunk and a stove running through a double pipe, which he didn't never get up his nerve to light. And on the shelf in the back end he had a

cupboard with all Aunt Em's best china set out. And as he told the people, it was all real shipshape and very actively arranged. A lot of those farmers commenced to take the Bible seriously after that. But they thought all whales was rigged out the same way.

Well, the first day Uncle Ben paid all his expenses, and every day he went along he made more money, because the word got into the papers and there was the picture took of him in New York and a picture of the complete whale, and even of the mules and Henry Plat. Farmers come from fifty miles away to intercept the creature and get a look at his insides.

BE A JONAH
FOR 50¢
COMPLETE
EQUIPMENT.

VII

BUT what was more important, Uncle Ben began to get more owdacious every day. By now he had killed whales in his early days with his bare hands, this one he'd fixed with his boat hook—you could read it in the papers—but of course he was getting on in years, and the number he had shot with his old

thirty-eight was financially extraordinary. He showed you the thirty-eight to prove it and the notches he had cut in it for woodchucks became whales. You'd never have guessed he'd ever have been married to Aunt Em.

You won't believe it maybe, but that old coot had made over a thousand dollars before he got to Rome. And by now the Utica papers had the whole story and described the boat and the china and remarked on the pattern, which was in forget-me-nots and roses, and Henry Plat begun to wonder if it wasn't about time they heered from Aunt Em.

But by the time they got to Rome there had been a week of hot weather and the whale had swollen some and on the last day Uncle Ben had to do some trimming to get her under the bridges. And when he done that, even though he'd been living in that whale for two weeks, he had to admit that she was getting higher. And every day after that, the more he trimmed her, the higher she got, and at Rome for the first time, the price of admission went down a quarter. But Uncle Ben had become a regular Wall Street wizard and he bought out two perfumery peddlers and did a handsome business in that line.

BE A JONAH
FOR 50¢
COMPLETE
EQUIPMENT.

VIII

BY this time, too, Henry Plat had become used to his uniform and was beginning to regret that the smell was getting so bad it threatened to stop the show. He hadn't ever had such light hauling to do in his life before. His breathing system had got used to blubber. But he felt real apprehensive, just the same, when, sure enough, there was Aunt Em on the dock, in front of the crowd, with her bag in her hand and her hat over her eyes, looking half as big as the whale and more than twice as powerful.

She'd been reading the papers. She didn't even look at the mules or Henry Plat or the yeller bow on the towline, and if her nose was working, she didn't even show it.

She waited till the boat had tied up and the gang come out and then she marched right aboard.

Uncle Ben come down the gang walk.

"Hullo Emmy," he says, and Henry was real startled to hear him so cool.

She stopped right still and kind of shivered.

"You runty little spider," she was always naming him by an insect, "is this the way you spend our money? Is this the way you hurry home to the bedside of your poor sick mother-in-law?"

Uncle Ben sounded patient.

"I was detained on business," he says.

"Business?"

Henry Plat kept feeling little cold winds climbing up the inside of them white pants. But then he seen Uncle Ben wink.

"Well, old girl," he says very loud, "welcome home. I'm surprised you was so long gone, but, now you're back, you're welcome."

He must have had that speech all figured out, I guess.

The crowd let out a cheer. Here was the whale killer being met by his loving wife. Crowds like that

kind of thing. If there'd only been a baby on hand for Uncle Ben to use, he could have collected a dollar, instead of twenty-five cents.

Well, Aunt Em took a look at the crowd and went below without talking.

In a minute up she come hollering mad. "Where's my chiney?" she yells. And outside of the condition of the blankets, the fat had come

through onto her crocheted tidies and the brass clock was running about forty-two hours a day with the oil that had got into it and striking faster than a man could wind it. Her curtains was streaked and the geraniums looked kind of sickly, and there hadn't been a dish washed in two weeks.

But she couldn't make no headway into that whale, it was jam full of humans, and when she finally did get in, she slipped on the floor and set down.

Uncle Ben helped her onto her feet and begun to explain the inside workings of that cashalot. And when he come to the money in it, Aunt Em was impressed. Even she could see that Uncle Ben was the killer of a whale, and wasn't scared of a woman any more, and so she commenced to cry.

"Look at my chiney, look at what you have done to my pretty boat," she says. "How can I expect to live in a cabin full of a smell like that?"

If you don't like it, Emmy, you can go home," says Uncle Ben.

But there was too much money involved. She stayed, and when she complained again, Uncle Ben told her to go home if she didn't like it. She got mellower and mellower, and when the price of admission had to drop to two for a nickel, she didn't even open the winders; and when they had to sell the whale for fertilizer in Rochester, for eighty cents, and Uncle Ben said to her, "This smell of fish is kind of strong. You'd better give the boat a good clean up," she didn't say a word but got right to work. Even when Henry Plat come in with his boots on, she didn't say a word.

And Uncle Ben just set in the cabin looking on, and gazing from time to time at them two glass eyes hung up where the geraniums used to set. He'd put his money in a bank himself, and his heart had gone with that whale, and Aunt Em wanted to keep what was left. Once he'd showed himself a man, she turned out a fond woman.

They worked the *Louisa* back through hogs and potatoes to grain until she was as nice as ever. But Uncle Ben had become a kind of old mariner, and Aunt Em continued a changed woman, and if you want to see them glass eyes, my Pa has got them in his house.

Walter D. Edmonds

was born in Boonville, New York. He attended St. Paul's School at Concord, Ne Hampshire, and then the Choate School, Wallingford, Connecticut. Four yea after receiving his A.B. degree at Harvard he married Eleanor Livingston Stets of Cambridge, Massachusetts. They have three children.

Walter Edmonds took Charles Townsend Copeland's course at Harvard t last year he gave it and during it sold his first short story—to *Scribner's Magazi* Since then his stories have appeared in such leading American magazines as *T Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, The Saturday Evening Post.* His first published no was ROME HAUL, which has been followed at intervals by such books as ERIE WAT DRUMS ALONG THE MOHAWK, CHAD HANNA, YOUNG AMES, IN THE HANDS OF T SENECAS, and a fine collection of his short stories, MOSTLY CANALLERS. The scene most of his stories has been the region of the Mohawk Valley. Walter Edmon explains this effectively: "I was born and mostly brought up in Boonville over the Black River near the Black River Canal, and when I started to write it w natural to start writing about the place and people I was most familiar with."

The colorful Mohawk Valley region is the scene of Walter Edmonds' first bo for children, THE MATCHLOCK GUN, genuinely American and truly great, award the Newbery Medal by the American Library Association as "the most dist guished contribution to literature for children published in 1941." More often th not he uses this favored home locale as a background for his books for you readers, although he writes understandingly of the South in his fine young nov CADMUS HENRY.

William Gropper

was born in New York City and began his fabulous career—a mere listing of l activities takes up a quarter of a page in WHO'S WHO—as an artist for the *New Yo Herald Tribune.* He has painted murals for the United States Post Office in Fre port, Long Island, the New Interior Building in Washington, D. C. and the Nort western Postal Station in Detroit, Michigan. His brilliant work is well represent in major museums throughout the United States, including the Metropolitan M seum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American A (all in New York), the St. Louis Art Museum in Missouri, the Walker Art Cen in Minnesota, the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois, and the Pennsylvania Acader of Art in Philadelphia. His paintings also hang in the Library of Congress Washington, D. C. He was awarded the Collier prize for illustration in 1920, t Harmon prize in 1930, the Young Israel prize in 1931, Third Prize by the Carne Institute for his wonderful Don Quixote, and the John Simon Guggenheim fello ship award in 1937. He has also illustrated countless books by authors such George Bernard Shaw, John Farrar and Jim Tully. An author in his own rig he has written and illustrated THE GOLDEN LAND, GROPPER, ALAY-OOP, PORTFOLIO CAUCASIAN STUDIES, AMERICAN FOLKLORE LITHOGRAPHIES.

William Gropper lives in New York in the Hudson River Valley but enj winter vacationing in Miami Beach, Florida.